

PROCEEDINGS
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THE STATUS OF THE GRAY-BREASTED LEAST
HONEY-GUIDES

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In connection with comparative studies of small honey-guides of the genus *Indicator* occasioned by Chapin's recent discovery of a new and extremely small species in the eastern Belgian Congo, *Indicator pumilio*,¹ I was able to arrange an opportunity to investigate the status and relationship of *angolensis* Monard² and *meliphilus* (Oberholser),³ an opportunity for which I am greatly indebted to the Royal Museum of Natural History in Brussels, the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle of La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, and the National Museum of Southern Rhodesia, Bulawayo. Previously (1954, 1955) I had treated *angolensis* as a synonym of *meliphilus* and had considered the latter as a race of *exilis*. However, I was careful to point out that there was some reason to think that further data might indicate that *meliphilus* was a distinct species, as both *exilis* and *angolensis* had been recorded by Verheyen (1953, pp. 406-407) from the Upemba Park, in the southern Belgian Congo, and *meliphilus* had been known to extend westward across Northern Rhodesia (Mwinilunga), an area where *exilis* (subsp. *pachyrhynchus*) had been taken (at Kansoku). Accordingly, if some form of *exilis* and *meliphilus* did occur together all the way from Northern Rhodesia to Lake Upemba, it would seem necessary to accord the latter full specific status. Chapin (1954, p. 633) accepted this conclusion and added *I. meliphilus* to his list of Congo birds.

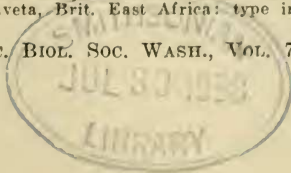
Examination of Verheyen's interesting material proved him to be quite correct in distinguishing between his specimens of *angolensis* and

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¹*Indicator pumilio* Chapin, Bull. Brit. Ornith. Club, vol. 78, 1958, p. 46 (Tshibati, southwest side of Lake Kivu, Belgian Congo).

²*Indicator minor angolensis* Monard, Arquivos do Museu Bocage, vol. 5, 1934, p. 55 (Tyhumbwe [Angola]; type in Musée d'Hist. Nat. de la Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland).

³*Melignotheres exilis meliphilus* Oberholser, Proc. U. S. Nat. Museum, vol. 28, 1905, p. 869 (Taveta, Brit. East Africa; type in U. S. Nat. Museum).



of *exilis* from the Upemba Park, Verheyen also proved to be correct in calling his birds *angolensis* and not *meliphilus*, as they agree much more closely with the type specimen of the former bird from Tyihumbwe, Angola, than with that of *meliphilus* from Taveta, Kenya Colony. As a result of my present examination I find that there seems to be no question but that *angolensis* is a western form of *meliphilus*. I find it difficult to conclude otherwise than that *meliphilus* should now be treated as a species partly sympatric with *exilis*, although I must admit to a persistent suspicion that they may yet prove to be ecologically allopatric. The specimens of nominate *meliphilus* are considerably dusker below, especially on the throat, breast, and upper abdomen, than the type of *angolensis* and four other examples of this race from the southern Belgian Congo. The Congo birds are slightly paler below than Monard's type from Angola, but this may not be a constant geographic difference. There is no appreciable size difference between *angolensis* and *meliphilus*, as may be seen from the following figures: *angolensis*—type, unsexed, wing 77, tail 48.2, culmen from base 7.3mm., 4 specimens from the Belgian Congo have wing lengths of 78, 81 (males), 65 (female) and 74 mm. (unsexed). Two males from Abercorn, Northern Rhodesia, have wing lengths of 74.5 and 79; tail 49.2, 49.8; culmen from base 7.5 and 7.6mm.; a female from Port Herald, extreme southern Nyasaland, measures: wing 79, tail 46.1, culmen from base 7.4mm. By comparison, the type of *meliphilus* (male) has the wing 76, tail 48.3, culmen from base 7.7; a female has the wing 78, an unsexed bird 82 mm. The bill is very slightly stouter and heavier in *meliphilus* than in *angolensis*, but the number of specimens examined is too small to establish this as a constant character.

It appears, then, that *Indicator meliphilus* is best treated as a specific entity composed of two races with the following ranges.

I. m. meliphilus: extreme eastern Uganda (Mount Moroto, Soronko River), and Kenya Colony from Turkanaland (Kacheliba) and the drier parts of the Suk area, east to the Taveta-Kilimanjaro plains, and south in suitable spots across Tanganyika Territory to Nyasaland (?) and to Mozambique (near Zobue, Kirk Mountains). Of this race *I. appelator* Vincent⁴ and *I. narokensis* Jackson⁵ are considered synonyms.

I. m. angolensis: Angola (Chitau, Tyihumbwe, Ebanga, and Quibula near Banguella) east to the southern Belgian Congo (Pelenge, Kaziba, Munoi, Upemba Park) and to Northern Rhodesia (Mwinilunga, Kabompo River, Abercorn, Fort Jameson), and southern Nyasaland (Port Herald).

In the present study I have seen but one Nyasaland example, and that from the extreme southern part of the country (Port Herald), but but it is a very pale bird, clearly *angolensis*. Whether the more northern Nyasaland records (Cholo, Ndirande, Mlanje), none of which are available for examination, are also *angolensis* or should be placed with *meliphilus* is uncertain. The two races should meet either in Nyasaland or in the areas immediately to the east. This Port Herald bird is paler

⁴*Indicator appelator* J. Vincent, Bull. Brit. Orn. Club, vol. 53, 1933, p. 130 (near Zobué, on Portuguese East Africa—Nyasaland frontier, 2900 feet: type in Brit. Museum).

⁵*Indicator narokensis* Jackson, Bull. Brit. Orn. Club, vol. 19, 1906, p. 20 (Doiyo Narok Mt., Brit. East Africa: type in Brit. Museum).

below, with more of a pale yellow wash on the midventral area than are either of the examples from Abercorn, Northern Rhodesia, with which it was compared. In its extreme pallor, it agrees with those from the Upemba Park, in the Belgian Congo. It is marked by the collector (C. Long) as immature, but it has the rectrices rounded terminally as in adult birds, and shows no sign of immaturity.

The species, *I. meliphilus*, is, on the whole, somewhat larger and much more grayish, less greenish, especially below, than *exilis*, and still more markedly so than *pumilio*. It appears to inhabit more open, less humid regions and is extremely similar in coloration to the still larger *Indicator minor* with which it appears to be more or less sympatric.

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